

Education Governance Public Engagement Process – Interim Report

In May 2006 Commissioner Richard Cate released a white paper entitled “The Governance of Education in Vermont – 1777 to 2006.” The paper, meant to stimulate a year-long discussion, outlined a plan for changing the governance model of the education system in Vermont. As part of this discussion, the department is hosting 30 facilitated meetings across the state. The goal of these meetings is to engage a large and diverse group of Vermonters in a conversation about governance in the Vermont education system. These meetings are being held at local schools across the state from January to May. Following the meetings, a report on the findings will be shared with the public. The State Board of Education did discuss this item when the white paper was first released, and supports the commissioner in this process.

Already we have heard from a wide variety of community members from towns large and small with varying education governance structures. In addition, we have opened up the public comment process via our Web site, e-mail, FAX and postal mail, and have received approximately 150 comments through these channels. Following the May release of the white paper there was a flood of responses from across the state, as well as significant media coverage. In both cases the tone of the reaction was largely supportive. DOE staff has copies of all communications received on the topic as well as news clippings and other pertinent information that informs the department on the public reaction and involvement in this conversation on education governance.

At the time of this report, nine meetings have been held. Meetings have been held in Bradford, Enosburg Falls, Ludlow, Burlington, St. Johnsbury, Fair Haven, Grand Isle, Springfield and Hinesburg. Between February 14 and March 6 no meetings were scheduled because of school vacations. The meetings, facilitated by hired consultants Robin Scheu and George Appenzeller and assisted by DOE staff, give the public an opportunity to share the advantages and disadvantages of their current education governance system and the commissioner’s proposed model. It is made clear that the model presented is not a foregone conclusion, but simply a tool for starting the conversation.

At the first public meeting in Bradford, the commissioner’s model was not included in the discussion. It became clear to DOE staff and facilitators that attendees were familiar with the white paper either through the media or their own interest, and wanted an opportunity to react to that specific proposal. We agreed that in order to generate a thoughtful and specific conversation from that point on it would be helpful to include the proposal in the meeting facilitation. In addition, Commissioner Cate created a DVD message which is now be presented at the start of each meeting so attendees could hear directly from him the intent of the process and the issues that led him to the proposal. At 11 of the meetings the Commissioner has been or is going to present his message in person. The process provides consistency in the message, rather than relying on the facilitator to convey the commissioner’s exact intent. The meetings following Bradford have been much more successful thanks to these changes, in that the public is discussing in-depth the current education governance structure and the possible changes to that structure. The meetings foster conversation between attendees in small groups, thus meeting the dual objectives of the meetings: informing the commissioner’s recommendations with public input, and fostering local conversations about governance.

Following each meeting, a write-up of the word-for-word comments from the meeting is posted on the Department Web site. This allows not only for transparency in the process but also for

meeting attendees and other members of the public to see what the discussions yielded at the different sites.

This report is a summary of what we have heard so far and what common threads can be found. Two-hundred and ninety people have attended the meetings that have been held thus far. 52 percent of the attendees have been school board members. 21 percent identified themselves as community members and 21 percent as parents. Six percent of the attendees identified themselves in other categories. It is important to note the differences in responses depending on the site and the demographics of the attendees. For instance, in Enosburg Falls, which is part of a supervisory union with several districts and boards, the majority of attendees were school board members. Their nearly unanimous suggestion was to leave the system of governance as it currently exists, but to move the contract negotiations and other bureaucratic responsibilities to the regional level. In Burlington, a supervisory district, with attendees including parents, legislators and school board members, the reaction to the proposal was almost entirely positive, and some said that the proposal did not go far enough. Notably, regardless of the response to restructuring education governance, every site suggested contract negotiations as a significant hindrance to their local education governance system.

Several themes emerged as **advantages to the current education governance structure**. The term “local control” came up universally, in some cases as key to schools’ successes and in some cases as “provincial” or a “myth.” Regardless, the idea of governance on a local scale included the following advantages to many meeting attendees: school district structures force deliberation and attention on the local school; local ownership (budgetary and otherwise) is facilitated; the representation system is transparent and accessible; and student performance is strong. When discussing the advantages to the current system, more emotive terms, such as “intimacy” and “identity,” were used to explain the connection of the public to the school.

However, when discussing the **disadvantages of the current education governance system**, the reaction was largely pragmatic. Disadvantages included human capital burnout and turnover; a complicated, bureaucratic structure; conflicting directives from boards and a disconnect and confusion between the administration, boards and school needs. Inconsistencies in curricula, programs, opportunities and policies were noted, as were geographic and political isolation of schools. More specifically, attendees noted inefficiencies in administration, purchasing and teacher contract negotiation. The fiscal and negotiating responsibilities are burdensome to many boards. Interestingly, many noted the problem of board members with specific personal agendas affecting the board directions, and that “emotion-based decision making” has a real and possibly detrimental effect on schools and students.

Several of the noted **advantages to the proposed education governance change** were in direct correlation to the disadvantages of the current structure. Attendees expected the change would lead to efficiencies and coordination in the allocation of administrative duties and staff, purchasing, facilities allocation, teacher and administrative contract negotiations and funding (including grants). Attendees expected that the revenue base would be larger and that school choice would be easier. They noted an expected consistency in curricula, programs and policies, as well as the sharing of resources such as programs (ex: student assistance, special education, extracurricular activities), facilities and educator talent. Finally, they noted the structural simplicity as an advantage, potentially making the education system easier to navigate for superintendents and board members, as well as drawing clear lines of leadership and decision making.

The **disadvantages of the proposed education governance change** that were raised mirrored what many found positive about the current structure. There was sincere concern about the loss of the local scale, which could lead to small schools getting “lost in the mix” and less focus on individual schools. Some felt the representation would not be as transparent or accessible, and that the weighted voting would lead to significant inequalities. Attendees also noted that there could be a loss of local involvement and that all of the above could lead to “disillusionment” and a “sense of loss.” There was also a concern that there would be less ability to rally the public around the budget and other school specific issues.

Several common threads emerged at the meetings that could fall under the category of **Fear of Change**. These included losing existing school choice, the closure of small schools, the removal of local input, a difficult transition period and concern over the “lowest/highest common denominator” factor. To clarify, people are concerned that a governance change will result in the lowest common denominator in terms of educational opportunities for students, and the highest common denominator for educator salaries and benefits. The weighted voting idea also created some anxiety.

One of the most promising portions of the meeting responses has been the polling for other suggestions. At each meeting new ideas emerge about how to improve education governance and the delivery of educational opportunities for students. Several meeting attendees suggested that, rather than consolidating into one board, school boards consolidate into one elementary board and one high school board. Again, supervisory union, regional or statewide level contracts and administrative services were a common idea across the board. In order to fill the perceived void of local input, suggestions were made to create local advisory committees or other methods of community involvement. Several attendees, as well as some public comments outside of the meetings, suggested consolidating supervisory unions to follow the lines of the 14 counties.

In order to make the change successful, meeting attendees suggested the commissioner present a clear vision for what this would look like in the future and its direct connection to educational quality. They suggest piloting the change in certain regions before imposing it statewide, and one board in Chittenden County volunteered to be the pilot. Attendees want a phased transition, which would be necessary for contracts and school-specific commitments. Some suggested creating a school board advisory panel to discuss the issue further, and a cost study to see the financial impact of such a change.

As we move forward in this public engagement process, we plan to more actively promote the meetings to the general public through print advertising and continued media interest, as well as by encouraging local education leaders to generate interest and attendance. We are in the process of developing a list of Frequently Asked Questions to better inform meeting attendees of the commissioner’s answers to specific questions, such as “What happens to school choice?” and “What happens to technical centers?” Finally, members of the public were generally appreciative of the opportunity to be heard before a final proposal was created.

Outside of the meetings, public comments continue to arrive via e-mail and postal mail from community members, educators and other interested parties. The comments that we have received by these means have almost all been in favor of some sort of change to the education governance structure. Themes such as a statewide calendar and collective bargaining rose to the surface, and though they are not related to the governance structure directly, there is a definite link between these issues and the changes presented in the Commissioner’s governance model.

Although the structure of the meetings has been successful in keeping the focus of the conversation on governance, the same cannot be said of the letters sent to our office. Many of the written comments focus on the cost of education and the writers see governance as once way to address this issue. In addition, some public concern about the teachers union has been expressed, and teacher contracts have been identified as the cost driver.

As noted above, the complete verbatim feedback from the meetings is available online at <http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/dept/governance.html>. As we hold the meetings from March 7 through May 3, we will continue to post these findings.

In conclusion, the Department looks forward to hearing from more Vermonters as we move forward with our public engagement process. We expect to begin conducting a random survey of Vermonters via phone and postal mail during March and April to see if the will of the general public is consistent with either the sentiments expressed at the meetings or the unsolicited written comments that we have received.